

Here's a little secret: seven great parks always have room for you.

By Sally Campbell Grout

If you're a regular visitor to Indiana's incredible state parks, you probably have a favorite. But if you're returning to your favorites frequently, you may not realize the Indiana Department of Natural Resources manages 35 fabulous properties, and each offers a unique experience. What's more, seven of those properties don't tend to draw big crowds. They're such hidden treasures, they're referred to as the "Seven Jewels," and sometimes have reduced rates for campers. The lack of crowds makes them ideal places to visit just about any time of the year. And after all, isn't getting some peace and quiet one of the main reasons you visit a state park?

Bigger and more beautiful than ever.

At 5,100 acres, Charlestown State Park in Charlestown (812-256-5600) recently doubled in size, earning it the ranking of Indiana's third largest state park. But to more than 70 species of birds, it's simply home. Bring your binoculars and look for bluebirds, wild turkey, and even bald eagles. And hikers: come prepared with the equipment you need, too. Charlestown State Park has four challenging hiking trails and an elevation change of more than 200 feet, which also means you'll spot some incredible views. Not ready to go it alone? Seasonal interpreters lead hikes and programs, and can point you out to some of the park's geological and historical features. Ready to relax? Park yourself at a picnic area or one of two reservable shelters, throw a line into Fourteen Mile Creek, or watch the kids scamper over the playground equipment. Rest up for day two at one of 60 reservable full hook-up campsites or one of 132 reservable electric campsites.

Splish, splash, it's time to relax.

While many Indiana state parks are known for natural wonders, Lieber State Recreation Area in Cloverdale (765-795-4576) offers some pretty cool man-made features, starting with a brand new family aquatic center where zippy slides send you into a clean, sparkling pool. You're also welcome to take a dip in Cagles Mill Lake and walk along its sandy beach. Additional activities include a three-quarter-mile nature trail, a sports and activity field, fishing and an accessible fishing pier, along with a marina, boat rental and water skiing. The full-time activities staff can direct you to the fun and the scheduled events. Be sure to take advantage of the picnic areas and six reservable shelters, and the 120 reservable electric campsites and 96 reservable non-electric campsites.

Live in a house of really big sticks.

The words “log cabin” conjure up many images. Cozy spaces. Pioneer life. Maple syrup. And after a visit to Harmonie State Park in New Harmony (812-682-4821) those words may bring back memories of a really great getaway. While this park does offer 200 reservable electric campsites, your family might enjoy a stay in the charming log-style cabins. Work up a sweat on the seven miles of hiking trails, a three-mile bicycle trail, or the three-and-a-half mile bridle trail, then cool off in the Olympic pool with a slide. Enjoy lots of picnic space and five reservable shelters and a Wabash River boat ramp. The Nature Nook offers a seasonal interpreter, hikes, and programs.

Canoeing, riding, and caving. And that’s just the first day.

Near Corydon, O’Bannon Woods State Park (812-738-8232) offers a full menu of activities. Hit the 24-mile Adventure Hiking Trail, or let your horse do the walking on more than 75 miles of bridle trails. (The trails are BYOH—Bring Your Own Horse.) You can canoe on the Blue River, and fish on both the Blue and Ohio Rivers. (Check out the natural escarpments overlooking the Ohio River.) When you’re ready to cool off, take an expert-led tour of the Wyandotte Cave Complex, where you’ll see beautiful limestone cave formations. Get a feeling for what life was like for early residents of the area when you see the pioneer homestead, haypress, and other log structures. To help you make the most of your visit, the park offers a staffed nature center, a forestry interpretive area, 281 reservable electric campsites, and picnic areas. Formerly the Harrison-Crawford Wyandotte Complex, O’Bannon Woods was renamed for Indiana Governor Frank O’Bannon, a Corydon native who died unexpectedly in 2003 while serving his second term.

Past and present meet here.

Here’s something you don’t see every day at a State Recreation Area: a model airplane flying field. But Mississinewa Lake in Peru (765-473-6528) has one, uniquely juxtaposed against the Native-American culture and history that’s such an important part of this area. Hit the trail for nine miles of moderate hiking to see the nature and history of the park. There’s also a 0.4-mile hard surface, easy access trail. Some of the park’s most amazing sites are natural limestone sculptures called “Cliffs of the Seven Pillars.” Among the other features: a disc golf course, boat launch ramps, fishing, interpreter-led programs with activities in the summer, four reservable shelters, 39 reservable full hook-up campsites, and 335 reservable electric campsites.

Meet some leaves.

Have a hard time telling an oak from an elm? Maybe it’s time you hit the Tree ID Trail at Starve Hollow State Recreation Area in Vallonia (812-358-3464). Along the way, you’ll see more than 30 different types of trees. The nature center with a seasonal staff can tell you even more about

the flora and fauna of the park. Then, see how many trees you remember as you ride the mountain biking trails or briskly walk the five hiking trails. If you prefer “water fun,” Starve Hollow offers a swimming beach, fishing, and boat rental. Kids can enjoy a playground, and kids of all ages can play volleyball, softball, and basketball. The park has 55 reservable electric campsites, 111 reservable non-electric campsites, and lakefront campsites.

Get wet. Get dry. Get out there.

With a sparkling lake that stretches across nearly 200 acres, it’s no wonder that Deam Lake State Recreation Area in Borden (812-246-5421) offers tons of water-filled fun. Enjoy a swimming beach, lakefront campsites, fishing, rental rowboats (seasonal), and a boat launch. On land, Deam Lake has plenty of other places to play and relax, including 275 reservable electric campsites, hiking trails, a nature center with a seasonal interpreter, and three shelter houses. Bike enthusiasts can ride the mountain bike trail and utilize several connecting spurs to the Clark State Forest mountain bike trails.

Inn-door lodging is also available.

Seven of Indiana’s state parks have inns, a great perk for year-round visitors. Here’s where to find them: The Abe Martin Lodge at Brown County State Park (877-265-6343) in Nashville; The Canyon Inn at McCormick’s Creek State Park (877-922-6966) in Spencer; Clifty Inn at Clifty Falls State Park (877-925-4389) in Madison; The Fort Golf Resort and Conference Center at Fort Harrison State Park (877-937-3678) in Indianapolis; Turkey Run Inn at Turkey Run State Park (877-500-6151) in Marshall; Spring Mill Inn at Spring Mill State Park (877-977-7464) in Mitchell; and Potawatomi Inn at Pokagon State Park (877-768-2928) in Angola.

Other surprises.

While every state park offers something special, and the “Seven Jewels” offer special rates and an added dose of quiet, other parks have unexpected perks. Indiana’s newest state park, Prophetstown State Park in the Lafayette/West Lafayette area (765-567-4919), is home to a re-created American Indian Village and a working version of a 1920s-era farm. Pokagon State Park in Angola (260-833-2012), with its long toboggan run, is a great winter destination. And White River State Park in Indianapolis (800-665-9056) is truly one-of-a-kind. At this urban park, you’ll find the Indianapolis Zoo, the Indiana State Museum, two war memorials, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, and Victory Field, home of the Indianapolis Indians baseball team.

The fresh air is waiting.

While you're probably ready to learn about the "Seven Jewels," you're also welcome at any of Indiana's fabulous outdoor properties. To learn more about them, and to find campgrounds across the state, visit camp.in.gov or enjoyindiana.com.